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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a supported transition plan for preschool students with special needs who are entering a kindergarten classroom. The transition plan includes the following phases: (1) make decision regarding kindergarten placement; (2) develop a preplacement plan which includes a visitation to the preschool program by kindergarten staff; and (3) implement supported transition. Key components of the plan include: empowering the general education teacher with knowledge and skills in dealing with the student with special needs; increased communication among educators, parents, and administrators; provision of services by a member of the preschool staff who acts as a transition technician with the student's general education teacher and the student in the kindergarten classroom; and a scheduled timeline of services. The plan was designed for a rural school setting but could be utilized in an urban setting with minimal adaptations. The plan utilizes the skills of an educator, speech/language pathologist, teaching assistant, and occupational therapist. Six recommendations for program implementation are offered. (Contains 32 references.) (JDD)

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SUPPORTED TRANSITION INTO KINDERGARTEN
FOR PRESCHOOL STUDENTS WITH
SPECIAL NEEDS

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MASTER'S PROJECT

Submitted to the graduate faculty at
Grand Valley State University
in partial fulfillment of the Master of Education

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Abstract

A supported transition plan for preschool students with special needs is described for students entering a kindergarten classroom. Key components of the plan are: empowering the general education teacher with knowledge and skills in dealing with the student with special needs, the dynamic learning process, the front-loaded phase of the transition plan, and the scheduled timeline of services which may begin as early as one to two years prior to the actual transition of the student.

The purpose of the transition plan is to: increase communication between educators, parents and administrators, to provide a smooth transition from a special needs preschool program into a regular education kindergarten classroom for the student, and empower the general education setting. The plan contains the following three phases: preliminary approach, pre-placement and supported transition phase. The plan was designed for a rural school setting but could be utilized in an urban setting with minimal adaptations. The plan utilizes the skills of an educator, speech/language pathologist, teaching assistant and an occupational therapist.

Chapter One

Problem Statement:

Many teachers and parents of young children with special needs do not know when and/or how to begin the process of transition from a pre-primary impaired program into a kindergarten classroom. This transition process is new and unfamiliar to the child, parents, teachers and administrators. Pre-school children with special needs have historically been educated in segregated classrooms and often segregated schools. The options for the child at age six were predominately another segregated (special education) classroom or segregated school. Today, the increasing parental choice is the child's neighborhood school (least restrictive environment) in the same general education classroom as his/her peers. This choice is referred to as inclusion. As a result of inclusion, general education teachers are being faced with the task of educating students with special needs in their general education classrooms with little or no preparation.

Importance and Rationale of Study

This study is important because inclusion is a new concept that has been embraced by parents; yet many educators and parents have not been equipped with methods and techniques to allow inclusion to be successful. Also, in my search for information, I found what appears to be a bounty of information available on the benefits of inclusion but there is a sparse amount on the transition process. Therefore, I feel it is important to design a transition

approach for educators, students and their families to use in order to increase the level of success in the classroom and decrease the level of anxiety and uncertainty.

The concept of inclusion dates back to the Education of the Handicapped Act (EHA) in 1975 that created strict criteria pushing schools to educate students with disabilities in the context of "regular education" (O'Neil Nov. 1993). In its Position Statement on Inclusive Education (1992), Michigan's State Board of Education formally endorsed the option of inclusive education as an innovative attempt at collaborative integration in which general and special educators across the state can join forces to effectively advance the education of all students. The Board's position statement defines inclusive education: "The provision of educational services for students with disabilities, in schools where non-handicapped peers attend, in age-appropriate general education classes under the direct supervision of general education teachers, with special education support and assistance as determined appropriate through the individualized educational planning committee (IEPC)" (p.1).

A process of how to transition (place) a student from an early childhood/special education program into a kindergarten program with subsequent follow-up is necessary to allow for the concept of inclusion to take place smoothly and to address the concerns of educators and parents. In The School Administrator, Ayres and Meyer report in their article that the one-shot approach to staff development has a long history of not making a difference in an educator's ability to teach children with special needs. Teachers need more than being told or reading about what they should do.

Inservice training must be ongoing and dynamic and must empower practitioners and parents to support one another as they define the shape an innovation will take in their schools and classrooms (Ayres, Meyer 1992).

Parents often have several questions regarding the transition process ranging from where to begin to questions regarding the kindergarten placement. Cheryl Flynn, the President of the Michigan Division on Early Childhood, writes: as the young special needs child prepares to enter kindergarten; which is often the first experience in an integrated setting with non-handicapped children, the family experiences increased feelings of concern for their child. They may have many questions: "Will the new teacher understand my child's needs?" "How will my child participate in gym and recess?" "Will the other children tease my child?" (Flynn, 1993, p.3).

As indicated by the sources above, the topic of supported transition from an early childhood/special education program is not only timely but important to the profession of education. I have selected this topic for study because of the following concerns:

- techniques and/or guidelines about how to transition students with special needs into the general education classroom are not available
- parents of children with special needs are uncertain and/or lack knowledge in advocating for the least restrictive environment (inclusion)
- the literature available supports the concept of inclusion, but does not provide educators with a process to allow inclusion to be successful

- general education teachers need on-going and dynamic inservice training regarding the specific educational needs of the student that has been placed in the teacher's classroom
- the State Board of Education endorses the option of inclusive education.

Background of the Study

Past practice in our school district was to place children from the pre-primary impaired (special education) program into the next segregated special education classroom. This practice continued until the parents with pre-primary impaired students began inquiring about the least restrictive environment for their child. The segregated schools were often miles away from the child's home and many parents were reluctant to have their child transported for lengthy periods of time. In some instances, the maximum transportation time was up to one and one-half hours one way to the segregated school. The idea of the student with special needs attending the neighborhood school with siblings and the neighborhood children appealed to many parents. The staff for the pre-primary impaired program began receiving an increased number of requests by parents to send their children to their local neighborhood school. The next question was "how?".

When general education administrators and teachers were first introduced to the idea of inclusion in our district it was met with a significant amount of resistance. Both felt uncomfortable and

unprepared to deal with educating the student with special needs. Many feared the unknown and verbalized their sense of inadequacy in dealing with students having special needs.

Historically, many educators in general education classrooms have had limited experience dealing with students having special needs as a result of mainstreaming, which is very different from inclusion. Mainstreaming is the concept by which students with special needs were placed in a special education classroom and would go into a general education classroom for specific academic and/or non-academic subjects. Frequently these subjects included art, music and/or physical education and the occasional academic class. The remaining subject areas were taught in the self-contained classroom by a special education teacher. The student with special needs was the responsibility of the special education teacher, not the general education teacher.

The concept of inclusion is different than mainstreaming in that the student with special needs will be placed in a general education classroom for the entire day and the general education teacher will be responsible for the student's education. The student is not "pulled out" for special services but the services are provided within the general education classroom. This often occurs using a team-teaching approach with the special education teacher and general education teacher working together to teach students in a classroom. Ancillary services such as the occupational therapist, speech/language therapist, physical therapist, social worker, etc. are also provided within the classroom. In this manner therapeutic i

intervention is considered to be provided or integrated into the classroom routine all day as opposed to a twenty minute session one or two times per week.

An extensive research review resulted in locating a limited number of articles on the subject of transition from an early childhood/special education program into kindergarten. The predominant concerns in the articles reviewed related to staff and parent issues prior to the entrance of the child with special needs into the kindergarten classroom. Questions most often asked were related to when and how the process should begin. A schedule or timeline of services outlining the process of transition would alleviate the fears and anxieties of all parties involved.

A transition process needs to be developed so that parents, educators, and administrators will be aware of when a student will begin attending the kindergarten classroom, where ancillary services will be provided, what equipment or teaching techniques the student will need to be successful in the classroom, and what type of supportive services the special education pre-primary team will be able to provide and for how long.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to design a transition plan that will provide the general education teacher with adequate training and information about the student with special needs before, during and after the transition from an early childhood/special education program into kindergarten. It will also provide the parents with information on how and when to initiate the process of inclusion for their child with special needs.

My goal is to design a transition model which will be practical and successful for teachers, parents, and administrators to use with students from a segregated pre-primary impaired program into a general education kindergarten.

The objectives of my project are:

1. Design a transition model to be used for preschoolers with special needs.
2. List and define the key members of the transition model.
3. Describe the chronological order of events leading to the transition of the student with special needs.
4. Describe the three stages of the model.
5. Define key terms.
6. Describe the limitations of the transition model.

This model is to be used in a rural setting for students with special needs. If adapted for a large number of students, the model could be used in any setting, rural or urban, as it would meet the needs of the student, family, and educational staff.

Chapter II

Literature Review

The literature reviewed was written between 1983 and 1993 regarding strategies and related articles addressing successful transition from a preschool program into a kindergarten classroom. The literature addressed the topics of: family and child involvement, preparation of general educators, inter-agency and administrative collaboration, and multi-disciplinary teaming.

The authors in the reviewed literature advocated for similar objectives and components regarding programs for students with special needs. The focus of each program was to make the transition from a pre-primary impaired program into a kindergarten classroom successful. Selected models that were reviewed and determined by this author as exemplary included those developed by: Pearson and Runkssmeier (1989), Rous (1991), and Fowler, Schwartz and Atwater (1991).

Preliminary Stage

"Transition is a movement from one program to another...", stated Prosnitz (1990). The transition of students with special needs into their local neighborhood school which is their least restrictive environment is a philosophy referred to as 'inclusion'. Salisbury (1991) reported, "The underlying supposition in inclusive programs is that all children will be based in the classrooms they would attend if they did not have a disability. Teachers, students,

parents, and administrators (in fact all stakeholders) define the school and classroom culture as including children with diverse backgrounds, abilities, and contributions" (p. 147).

This paper will focus on the transition process which ends with the child being successfully 'inclusioned' into the kindergarten classroom. It is not the intent of this author to question the merits of inclusion. The focus is on strategies that the teacher, parent, and administrator may use to ease the anxieties and fears of all parties involved.

The need to establish a planning committee was often the first criteria in the various projects researched. This committee is designed to meet the needs of the family, educators and administrators and allows for a flexible and individualized transition plan. Rous (1991) has published guides, catalogues and training manuals to facilitate the transition process and in her STEPS (Sequenced Transition to Education in the Public Schools) model, she emphasized the fact that transition involves collaboration with one's colleagues and peers. It is stressed that transition is not a single event but a process.

A committee or team should include both regular and special educators as well as the principal. A committee or team approach will create a greater sense of shared responsibility for all students. "Led by the principal, the team would plan for and implement the inclusion of students with special learning needs-making it clear to teachers, students, and parents that inclusion is a school wide issue" (Reins, Snell and Sailor, 1991 p. 331).

In a publication written by Bredekamp et al. (1986), an advisory group provided families, teachers, and administrators with a variety of ideas to work cooperatively with one another developing a process to ease the transition between the educational settings. This guide was designed for the typical pre-school student but it does address specific issues which would relate to the student with special needs.

Bredekamp et al. (1986) described "the four keys to successful transition as:

- providing program continuity through developmentally appropriate curricula for preschool and kindergarten children;
- maintaining ongoing communication and cooperation between preschool and kindergarten staff;
- preparing children for the transition; and,
- involving parents in the transition" (p.5).

Administrators in both the pre-school and kindergartens are encouraged to set the stage for the transition process by facilitating communication between the two programs. The idea of maintaining open communication and acceptance of one's professionalism and commitment is emphasized as being essential for the transition process. Bredekamp (1986) included a number of suggestions that would assist educators in developing a mutual respect and understanding for one another. The guide provided suggestions for the pre-school staff and the kindergarten staff to involve parents in the transition process. These suggestions will empower the family with a sense of involvement in their child's

education. They will also allow for the parents to have the opportunity to identify with their child's new teacher and feel confident with the change of schools and teachers. The activities are designed for the typical child but could easily be used for the parent of a child with special needs.

Ross-Allen (1991), the Outreach Coordinator for Project TEEM, listed the following five major activities for planning a successful transition of children with special needs into kindergarten.

- Step One: Establish a Planning Team
- Step Two: Develop Goals and a Philosophy Statement Regarding Transition Planning
- Step Three: Develop Written Transition Planning Procedures
- Step Four: Gain System-Wide Support and Commitment
- Step Five: Evaluate The Transition Process (Ross-Allen, 1993 p.3).

The TEEM model is designed to address the strengths, needs, and characteristics of children, families, and school systems. It was also designed to promote the implementation of best practices in transition planning (Ross-Allen, 1993, p.1). In step one of the TEEM model the directive is to establish a planning team. Once the team has been established and team members identified, the next step is to provide the team with a strategy to develop and/or improve team functioning. The "Teamwork Checklist" published by the Institute on Community Integration at the University of Minnesota has twelve questions which will help one to find out how well a group works together as a team. The team answers the

questions by indicating "yes" or "not yet". The "not yet" response indicates an area a team may wish to address to improve team functioning (p. 3).

Training

Training was an issue that was deemed a crucial element for a successful transition by several authors. "All teachers will need training to understand how to include students with disabilities (O'Neil 1993). D'Alonzo and Ledon (1992), suggests that the quality, training, and attitude of the teacher and other personnel involved is of utmost importance to the success of an integrated program. They also report that cooperation and consultation between general and special education teachers are crucial elements to a successful program (p. 281). The changes in roles of both general and special educators as well as related services personnel must be accompanied by training to prepare individuals for the changes reported Feldmar (1991).

It was interesting to read that John J. Hoover's (1987) study on special education classroom experience: 'Effects upon preservice elementary teachers' knowledge of handicapped children' supported previous researchers who found that experience with the handicapped and/or one special education college course did not increase knowledge related to exceptional children (p. 29).

LeRoy (1992) suggested that an inclusive school also address teacher issues such as: training that addresses the needs of teachers in new roles, new roles and responsibilities are understood and implemented, classroom support is identified and procured, etc. In a different study which surveyed teachers' concerns in accepting

students with special needs, Ait-Hocine (1990) comprised the following "list of suggestions from the teachers which were:

1. More published information in schools about handicap.
2. A list of specialists who can be contacted when necessary.
3. Discussion and meetings with all involved with the child with disabilities (including medical and paramedical professions). A request was made for some meetings to be held in the absence of the parents.
4. Consistent, positive support from the appropriate professionals.
5. Course for teachers prior to the arrival of the children with disabilities in the classroom.
6. In-service training" (p. 21).

Most inservice training efforts in education and human services tend to segregate participants, observed Sykes and his staff who are with the Ohio State University Early Integration Training Project. When professionals attend workshops with their peers, this individual skill development does not appear to encourage cross-disciplinary collaboration that is required for successful inclusion. Sykes' different approach credits the success to the following features: "(1) a value-based approach; (2) a format and incentives that invite diversity; and (3) an approach to program and service development that is based upon the strengths of existing community resources." (Sykes p.9).

Training session/sessions should have the following characteristics: systematic, comprehensive, inclusive, multi-modal and professional (Feldmar 1991). When planning for an inservice, Lewis, Dunn, Hansen and Douglas (1991) suggest a cooperative learning experience in which participants will: (1) complete an attitudinal survey, (2) receive general information regarding integration and (3) participate in planning of the in-services for the future and (4) be observed by trainer a minimum of one hour before the next scheduled meeting.

Teachers teaching one another in a collaborative manner is a technique that Schaffner and Buswell (1991) offered as an option. "Some examples of team collaboration are:

- Collaborative consultation (a regular educator, a special educator, and others meeting on a regular basis to develop strategies for supporting a particular student)
- Team teaching (a regular education and a special education teacher planning and teaching lessons together)
- Peer coaching (teachers modeling and providing feedback about effective teaching techniques for each other)..."

(p. 11).

The student with medical needs may have equipment, characteristics, or procedures which are totally foreign to the regular education teacher. It is paramount that someone provide educators with the necessary medical information prior to the arrival of the student with medical needs. Donlin-Shore (1993) reports that the educational setting may be reluctant to readily

accept students without adequate information pertaining to the child's:

- diagnosis
- health history
- and a list of medications, their side effects and how they may affect learning, etc.

Donlin-Shore (1993) also reported that the information provided to the school must be provided in terms or presented to educators "in a format that provides clear information about the nature of the disability in easily understood nonmedical terms, and it should be accompanied by practical recommendations on how to support the child's special needs" (p.26). Time for joint planning and collaboration must be made available for staff members to meet (Feldman 1991). The staff members include general and special educators as well as all ancillary staff, such as the occupational, physical and speech therapists. If a teaching assistant is involved with the student, that person should also attend the staffing meetings.

A comprehensive health services plan developed by Lowman (1993) provides the school with a detailed description of the child including: description of child's medical condition, strategies to support the child in the school setting, feeding and nutritional needs, transportation arrangements, medication to be dispensed (amount, time and person administering), procedures to be performed by school personnel, where the procedure should be performed, who will perform the procedure, training that is to take place prior to

the child entering class, schedule for review and monitoring of training, emergency procedures, plan for absences, and plan for change (3-5).

Techniques

A timeline of services which serves as a guide for both the educators and the parents is a format utilized by several authors. The timeline may be described in general terms such as "spring" (Cordisco & Izeman 1993), (Bredekamp 1986), and (Fowler, Schwartz & Atwater 1991) to indicate when the process should begin as opposed to delineating the process into defined monthly (Pearson & Runksmeier 1989), (Johnson, Cook, and Yongue, 1990) activities. Both formats are acceptable and allow educators to select the technique which best fits the needs of the educational setting in which one is working.

In the Final Report of the Inclusive Education Recommendations Committee (1993) the committee suggests in "Recommendation 3.64: The State should provide and/or distribute adequate funds to ensure that teachers have sufficient time to learn good practices, practice them, and collaborate with professional peers to make certain that new skills and strategies are acquired and shared" (p.3). Roach, Samberg & Kysilko (1992) reported that "Planning for change must be ongoing and comprehensive.... Teachers must:

- Seek out assistance in your classroom from other professionals, emphasizing a cooperative or team teaching approach to all children.

- Explore/observe a variety of teaching methods to learn different ways to tailor instruction to the multiple needs and learning styles of your students.
- Accept that not all students will cover the same material at the same time, and that a variety of curricula (e.g. functional literacy, community mobility, and college preparation) are equally valid for different students.
- Above all, be flexible. This type of change takes time and every teacher makes mistakes along the way as he/she learns to work with increasingly diverse students." (p.38).

Classroom modifications for students with impairments may need to be addressed by the general education teacher suggested Wheeler (1991). Issues to consider would be: does the physical arrangement allow for students with physical impairments using a wheelchair or crutches to freely access desks, aisles, and all areas of the room, and/or selective seating assignments for students with sensory losses (vision and hearing).

The curriculum for students with special needs may need to be adapted. For example, students with physical impairments should have the opportunity to participate in the gym class even if they are in a wheelchair. Quite often the gym teacher, who lacks experience with students with a physical impairment, believes that the student with a physical impairment should observe but not participate- the all or nothing rule. The student's therapist should meet with the gym teacher and review the student's present level of capabilities. Once the therapist reviews the capabilities of the student and also the precautions related to the child's diagnosis, the gym teacher

will be able to engage the student in the gym activities in a safe manner. "Acknowledging the benefits and practicing the principles of "partial participation" is a good way to include many students-particularly those with severe disabilities-in school activities with their peers" (Raynes, Snell & Sailor, 1991, p. 329).

As teachers are preparing for the first day of school, many are concerned about their students' reactions to a student with special needs. This is especially true if the teacher has never taught a student with special needs before. In an effort to ease this transition process and make it a positive one, Montie (Spring/Summer 1993) suggests the following:

- "Ask the parent(s)/family and/or student. In certain situations a family may want to join the class during the first week to share stories and answer questions; in other situations a family may feel that simply handling questions as they come up is the best method.
- In classrooms that have "student of the week", ensure that certain students are the 'student of the week' during one of the first weeks of school. Pick students for whom you feel some information early on about them, their families, and their abilities and needs will be important. This provides a natural context in which discussions about the student can occur.
- Conduct student interviews as a part of the classroom routines. Include the new student(s) among the first interviewees. Perhaps ask a family member or friend to assist in responding to questions directed to the student.

- Invite occupational therapists or other specialists to present information to classes on assistive devices students use, such as wheel chairs or touch talkers.
- Show videotapes as a part of lessons to explore more about disabilities and the abilities that everyone has, such as: Friends Who Care Easter Seals Curriculum (videotape, posters, lesson plans) and The Same Inside.
- Talk openly with the whole class about this being a new experience for you, the teacher, having someone like the new student in your class. Let students know that you may not always be sure how to handle situations, just as they may not, and you will all learn together!
- Simply modeling and responding openly to questions from children is the most powerful tool. A highly important factor in promoting acceptance and understanding between children of all ability levels appears to be adult attitudes and modeling of valuing behavior that occurs on an ongoing basis.
- Provide some direct, up front information if the team determines this as important. However, try to think *only as special as necessary*. A goal is to help this particular student become a member and active participant in his/her new classroom...a goal that we have for all children in a classroom. One strategy would be to have whole class lessons about both the commonalties we all share in a

classroom, as well as differences (e.g., learning differences, physical differences, cultural differences) affect people's participation in school and the community.

- Continue to provide incidental instruction (i.e., 'seize the moment') throughout the year as well as more formal lessons (as you see appropriate) on topics such as recognizing commonalities/celebrate differences, feelings, friendships, growth, cooperation/collaboration, social-emotional etc.
- Members of the student's team will decide what level of preparation/information makes sense. Teachers, as a member of the team, in partnership with others (including the family, student, and peers), will come up with the best decisions. The decision to use these or other approaches should depend on what the team thinks makes the most sense for a particular child" (p. 4-5).

Many teachers focus so much of their time on the academics and activities of daily living skills such as toileting and dressing that they forget about social interaction. "The most important practical finding from research assessing the effects of early childhood integration is that social interactions between non-disabled and disabled children do not occur spontaneously" reported Hanline (1985). Hanline suggested that simple techniques such as praising the behavior of a non-disabled child playing with a child with special needs, i.e. "You two are playing together so cooperatively," or "Tom and Aisha are sharing their crayons. They are good friends to each other" (p. 47) will promote friendships among the children.

Strategies to create an "inclusive" environment as reported by Froschl and Sprung (1983) include: display photographs of adults and children with disabilities with other pictures on the walls, invite disabled adults to the classroom or arrange a trip to the workplace of a disabled adult, use hand puppets, include positive books about children and adults with disabilities in the classroom library, provide the children with props such as canes for the visually impaired or crutches for the physically impaired. A child who has the opportunity to use crutches or a walker will experience the amount of body strength it takes to 'walk' with crutches or a walker.

Family Issues

As many authors indicated, the family concerns with transition are well documented in the professional literature. LeRoy (1992) listed the family issues which should be addressed in an inclusive school and a separate section for the student as well. To facilitate transition for the families, the professional must provide support to them by providing the family with: general information (written or verbal) about the transition process, access to one professional during the transition process for information and support, contact with the receiving teacher and a visitation to the new program, and follow-up support (Hanline, 1992).

Flynn (1993) reported that family stress may contribute to decisions that encourage children to remain in segregated placements even though the children may be capable of being integrated into regular settings. To prevent this from happening, Flynn suggested eight family centered components in the transition

plan. Open communication between families and school personnel and preparing the child for the change are included and are very important components for a positive transition.

"Transitions that are well-planned maximize the probability of a smooth and effective transition. When they are not well-planned, and children and families are not prepared for the new program, transitions can be stressful and unsettling and a time of insecurity, uncertainty, and vulnerability" (Chandler, 1991, p. 12). Parents often ask the question, "What's my role in the transition process?". Since the parent knows the strengths of their child the best, Prosnitz (1990) listed these three important roles a parent can take: advocate, teacher and partner. Most importantly, parents should take an active role in the decision making process-ask questions, visit programs and get involved.

The cooperative efforts of the parents may include the following as recommended by Roach, Samberg, & Kysilko (1992):

- Offer the teacher in your child's inclusive classroom support and tips for working with your child. Good communication and information is the best way for a general education classroom teacher to feel comfortable working with your child.
- Request neighborhood school placements for your child with special needs at every IEP meeting.
- Become active in your neighborhood school/parent association to reaffirm your child's inclusion in the school program.

- Become active in after-school, community-oriented activities to reaffirm your child's inclusion in community life (p.38).

Chapter III

Introduction

The supported transition into kindergarten for preschoolers with special needs project was designed to meet the needs of the educational setting in which I work. The project design is unique in the supported transition (front loaded) phase which is the culmination of the transition process. Otherwise it appears to be quite similar to various designs found in the research literature in the initial stages (preliminary and pre-placement phases).

The supported transition phase or the "front-loaded" phase, refers to the services by a member of the pre-primary impaired staff (transition technician) with the student's general education teacher and the student in the kindergarten classroom. This follow-up or continuous monitoring of the student with special needs in the general education classroom allays many fears that the teacher and/or administrator may have in dealing with the student with special needs. This dynamic learning process, which is lacking from the programs reviewed, empowers the general education teacher with knowledge and skills in dealing with the new student.

District Program Description

Pre-school children, (in the school district where I work), who have been identified with special needs between the ages of three and six years are placed into a pre-primary impaired program. This program serves two and one-half counties, Charlevoix, Emmet, and Antrim, and is presently located in an elementary school in Harbor Springs. Staff members include: a preschool impaired educator,

teaching assistant and speech/language pathologist and an occupational therapist is also assigned to the program one day per week.

The program has two sessions, morning and afternoon. The students are assigned to a session according to the child's geographical area. There may be a total of 24 students assigned to the program with 12 students in each session. Transportation to the program is provided via station wagons or vans equipped with wheelchair lifts when indicated.

Students attend the program two and one-half hours, four days per week. The fifth day staff members make home visits to the students' homes on a rotating basis. Special meetings with team members, administrators, kindergarten and/or pre-school teachers, etc. are also scheduled on the fifth day when possible.

The classroom is designed to include developmentally appropriate practices. Therapy is on-going in the classroom utilizing the skills of all team members. For example: Mark is a student with a physical impairment and he is beginning to learn how to walk using a walker. The occupational therapist has demonstrated to the staff the proper techniques for Mark to learn how to use his new walker in the classroom. As a result, Mark receives daily walker training during functional activities or play time as opposed to learning the technique 30 minutes per week in an isolated therapy room.

Some of the students in the classroom are "dually" enrolled. That is, the student attends the pre-primary impaired program for a half-day session and attends his/her neighborhood pre-school or

kindergarten classroom the second half of the day. Communication to the various program teachers and parents is accomplished by documenting notes and/or memos in the student's notebook which is in each student's backpack. That notebook travels with child to each program and the student's home. Everyone is encouraged to use this means of communication.

Purpose of Transition:

The purpose of the supported transition program is to:

- improve communication between regional service center staff and general education staff regarding special education student programming
- provide a smooth transition between a center-based segregated pre-primary impaired school program and a kindergarten class in the child's neighborhood school
- support families, students, teachers and administrators in a timely yet flexible manner
- provide continuous monitoring of special education growth in a general education setting
- empower the general education setting.

Method:

The transition method includes the following three phases:

- Preliminary approach that includes the family and member(s) of the pre-primary impaired team. A decision of kindergarten placement begins during regularly scheduled home visits with the family. The home visits are part of the pre-primary impaired classroom program.
- Pre-placement plan begins in January, earlier if necessary, of the child's last year in pre-school. A pre-school transition team member contacts the local school district administration and special education staff and a visitation to the preschool program by kindergarten staff is completed by March. The Individualized Educational Planning Committee is completed by June.
- Supported transition phase incorporates the front-loaded transition techniques by the transition technician which may include: regularly scheduled weekly contact to the classroom, attendance of entire Kindergarten day, become "another pair of hands" to the kindergarten program.

Timeline of Services:

The schedule or timeline of services will also be clear to the student's parents, teacher and administrator with specific directions as to who, how and when to contact the appropriate personnel. The suggested timeline of services is described below.

January

The Preschool transition team member (transition technician) contacts the local school district administration and special education personnel. This contact is accomplished via a letter (see example in appendix). The letter includes: the student's name, present educational functioning levels, and developmental levels pertinent to the student's educational needs, transportation and equipment needs.

This contact to the local school district administrator occurs after the parent has been through the preliminary approach. This preliminary work includes providing the parent with program options for their child. At this time, our district has students attending the least restrictive environment as well as special education classrooms or self-contained classrooms which may or may not be that child's neighborhood school.

Parents may request a visitation to the various program options available to their child. A transition technician will help to facilitate that visitation with the program and the classroom teacher.

March

Visitation to the preschool impaired program is made by the kindergarten staff member(s). The kindergarten teacher is invited to observe the student with special needs in the pre-primary impaired program. Relevant information pertaining to the student's disability is shared with the kindergarten teacher. It is felt that the teacher will feel more comfortable having the student with special needs in the classroom if the teacher is satiated with

knowledge regarding the student's educational and medical needs. This is also a good time to review any information, such as a physical or speech impairment, that may affect the student's successful educational plan. Adaptive teaching strategies are demonstrated during the visitation.

June

The Individualized Educational Planning Committee (IEPC) is convened and completed by the local school district staff. Staff members from the pre-primary impaired program attend the IEPC to share information relating to the student's needs and to review the "front-loaded" transition phase timeline. By this time the family has participated in all the normal pre-kindergarten activities such as Kindergarten Round-up, school visitation, vaccinations, etc. and the IEPC is the culmination of the preliminary and pre-placement phases of the transition plan.

September

Weekly contact to the kindergarten classroom for the entire kindergarten day is completed by the transition technician. The first day of school is when the 'supported transition phase' may begin. Best practice suggests that all students begin school the first day, including students with special needs. If it is determined that a transition technician should be present in the kindergarten classroom on the first day of school, a transition technician is there. This may occur with students who have multiple physical needs or a specific behavioral teaching approach. If the transition technician does not begin the first day, the visitation occurs within the first week of school.

The transition technician stays in the classroom the entire kindergarten day. Since the student with special needs is familiar with the transition technician from the pre-primary impaired program, the behavior, speech and occupational therapy objectives are naturally and smoothly facilitated within the kindergarten classroom. As the transition technician is working with the student with special needs on the behavioral techniques or adapted teaching techniques that have been described in the student's report the teacher observes first-hand those techniques being implemented with the student. Many times the kindergarten teachers request the transition technician to lead the classroom in a group activity while she interacts with the student with special needs. This allows the classroom teacher to implement the objectives or techniques with the student and if questions arise, the transition technician is in the room to answer questions or engage in problem solving.

One must remember that the transition technician takes the direction of the classroom routine from the classroom teacher. Teachers employ many different teaching styles and techniques in the educational arena and it is the role of the transition technician to assist or guide the student with special needs to be successful within the classroom. The focus is on the student with special needs and to provide support to the teacher for a successful transition.

This dynamic learning process has been a most effective approach as reported by the classroom teachers. The teachers value the literature pertaining to the student's disability, the classroom visitations and the review of the educational objectives, but they

concur with the research, that training techniques specific to the child's special needs is what helps make the classroom experience for both teacher and child a success. (The weekly contact to the kindergarten classroom occurs on a weekly basis through September and October.)

November

The transition technician visits to kindergarten decrease to bimonthly. The kindergarten teacher is aware of the reduced visitation schedule and if additional support is indicated or requested by the classroom teacher, the team may alter the schedule to continue weekly contacts. At the time of the change, parameters are established as to the length of the continued weekly contacts. Documentation is sent to the teacher and the special education directors of the local school district and the Intermediate School District defining the extended length of time and the rationale for the additional support. The timeline of service represents a guide that is flexible to meet the needs of both teacher and student.

December

Transition technician visits decrease to monthly. Again, this decrease depends upon the needs of the teacher and the student. Typically, the classroom teachers feel comfortable working with the student with special needs and confident with the decreased monthly visits.

January

The last transition technician visit occurs and the local school district special education team assumes responsibility of the student. The transition technician contacts the local district's

special education team to review the student's present level of functioning within the classroom and the student's educational and diagnostic materials. It is at this time the local special education team assumes full responsibility of their student.

In order for this supported transition program to work, it was necessary for the Intermediate School District Board and administrators to embrace and support this idea. When transition technicians are in the kindergarten classroom a substitute may be hired for the pre-primary impaired program. This substitute is typically one who has been trained by the staff and is familiar with the program goals and objectives. The team also schedules school visitations so that preferably only one pre-primary impaired staff member is out of the classroom at a time. The team strives to maintain this staff ratio to continue successful programming within its own pre-primary impaired program.

Conclusions

This supported transition program has been successful as reported by parents, kindergarten teachers and administrators. The goal of this program is to empower general education teachers with the tools necessary to teach students with special needs without the assistance of a teaching assistant. The students needing a teaching assistant are typically those students who are physically impaired and unable to perform toileting, dressing and/or eating activities independently.

The students with special needs who have been transitioned into kindergarten had been identified as: trainable mentally impaired, educable mentally impaired, physically and otherwise health impaired, hearing impaired, speech and language impaired, and severely multiply impaired.

During the 1993-1994 school year, this supported transition plan was used to transition nine students. Two of the nine students did not attend the pre-primary program but had been receiving occupational therapy services in the home prior to attending kindergarten.

The entire team must embrace the philosophy of the supported transition techniques and understand the implications of the same in order to answer the multitude of questions from general educators and administrators. Since the philosophy of inclusion is not yet a conventional or popular practice of education for students with special needs, the process of transition is often viewed with skepticism. When the transition technician can answer questions regarding the process and implement the techniques necessary for a smooth transition then the general education teacher and administrator may become the best advocate for this transition process.

Organization of schedules and the assumption of classroom responsibilities collectively allows our team to perform the many tasks required to make this project successful. The project also requires a camaraderie and a team with a sense of humor in order

for it to succeed. Acknowledgment of open communication, the acceptance of each member's skills and the desire to learn are factors which have established success for this project.

Recommendations

- Local special education teams should become knowledgeable about the supported transition phase and develop a plan to maintain the level of support the local educator may need for the student with special needs when the transition technician assistance is phased out of the regular education classroom.
- It has been suggested to local special education team members that planning for the transition from kindergarten to first grade may need to begin in January or February. This would allow time for the first grade teacher to observe the student working in the kindergarten room and become knowledgeable about the student's special needs.
- The 'timeline of services' could be adapted for all students with special needs moving from one grade to the next. Local special educators may use the supported transition ideas of this project to assist general educators in all grades to become more knowledgeable about the needs of the student being placed into the regular education classroom. All teachers should be given the proper techniques and information to teach all students in the regular education classroom.

- If teaching assistants are indicated for a student with special needs, a training program should be designed to instruct the teaching assistants prior to working with students with special needs.
- Principals and superintendents should meet with all teachers and review the concept of inclusion and develop a plan for their district to embark on the process of including students with special needs into their schools.
- The Michigan School Board of Education should consider adopting the Timeline of Services on a state-wide basis for all students with special needs moving from a pre-primary program and/or from one grade to the next.

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